

University of Dundee

Of Other Spaces

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Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hao, S. (Curator). (2017). Of Other Spaces: Where Does Gesture Become Event? Chapter Two, Exhibition, Cooper Gallery. Exhibition, Cooper Gallery.

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Of Other Spaces: Where Does Gesture Become Event?

Cooper Gallery Dundee

28 October to 4 March

Chapter One of Cooper Gallery's two-part 'Of Other Spaces: Where Does Gesture Become Event?' features archival materials relating to several feminist art exhibitions beginning in the 1970s, as well as artworks and documentation surrounding the activist work of selected figures up to the present. Exuberantly full of carefully assembled text, press clippings and information cards, there is a clear effort not to efface the radical intention of the artworks by the 19 artists on display.

Across the entirety of the Cooper Gallery and both stages of the project, work is displayed on and around high metal exhibition units by artist duo Cullinan Richards. Looking like repurposed metal bedframes and ordered without recognisable sequence, the materials coincide and reference one another unpredictably, covering the mirrored surfaces they lie on. With a non-prescriptive order of reading, radical feminist publications and political correspondence are inseparable in their intention and enquiry from contemporaneous artworks.

For example, in front of Jo Spence's starkly composed bodily subversions of the documentary format, there is a cluster of her published writings on the inevitable politics of photographic representation. She encourages the constant questioning of the constructedness and partiality of composition, focus, cropping and captioning of pictures of women. Read now in the context of the click-through album and unprecedented levels of photographic production, the works form an important vocabulary on how an image is instrumentalised.

Cullinan Richards's high metal struts interrupt a clear view of the wall-based work that is included. In the case of Mary Kelly's 2005-07 lightbox installation *Flashing Nipple Remix*, three photos depict a row of performers restaging the

'Of Other Spaces: Where Does Gesture Become Event?' installation view of Chapter One, Cooper Gallery, Dundee



1971 protests against the Miss World contest. The archival materials include written accounts of the performances, along with details of Kelly's role as part of the Berwick Street Film Collective in making the experimental film *Nightcleaners*, 1975, about the exploited and victimised women who cleaned offices at night in the 1970s. At the same time, photography and lucidly poetic writings by Annabel Nicolson are included, with details (in Chapter Two) of her extensive involvement in the Greenham Common Commune. There is an important emphasis that sets individual artists and artworks within women's collectives and networks of ideas.

The issues raised by the featured artworks and associated activism are carefully set apart from an easy narrative or happy historical progression. Instead, the non-hierarchical arrangement of the materials keeps live the wide-ranging observations on the inequality of opportunities for women artists and the material obstacles of domestic and care responsibilities, indispensable forms of feminist DIY activism and organisation, the precarious position of women as low-paid workers and the desire for collaborative feminist alternatives to artistic competition.

Below the metal constructions, a monitor on the floor shows Georgina Starr's video *The Joyful Mysteries of Junior*, 1994-2012. One of the main byways that brings the timeline to the present decade, thematically it connects with other works in the room, with Starr's experiences of taking up craft, followed by bouts of depression and disillusionment before the potential remedy of revisiting past work occurs to her in the form of a 2012 duet with a puppet, Junior, which she is shown making 18 years earlier. Here, strategies of the past revisited as means of current survival reactivate feminist histories of collectivity, consciousness-raising and self-organisation.

One month later, and the volume of materials of Chapter One has been reduced and the number of artists included almost halved. In the foyer, some of the larger artworks have been removed, leaving Cullinan Richards's scaffolding more naked than before. Hanna Tuulikki's sad-sounding and improvised bird song melody (from her work *Cloud Cuckoo Island* upstairs) is sometimes interrupted by the street sounds in

Annabel Nicolson's 1983 video *Stock Exchange – Women's Peace Action*, which is projected on the wall. In this work, protesters lie across the zebra crossing on the road leading to the stock exchange, halting traffic in the financial centre of the city.

While the documentation and works of Chapter One emphasised the material's immediacy and interaction, Chapter Two by contrast clears space for a level of distantiation. Featuring moving-image works, in the main, audio is frequently set against video. For instance, the sound is removed from the montage of 1970s pseudo pop band *Moody and the Menstruators* (1971-74) – their visual experimentation given pride of place, or abstracted for a quieter reflection (Anne Bean interview AM398). Similarly, in Linder's collage of Northern Soul and ballet dance performances, rhythm and melody dissolve slowly to textural sound as event documentation gives way to authorship through uneffaced editing: gestures are spliced, dropped into slow-motion, and the screen is split at moments with a symmetrical line.

Across the room, the screens of Starr's recent two-channel video work are each mounted on a large unit of their own, facing in different directions. In one video, an ambiguous gaze is shared between the women as they blow bubblegum into one another's faces. The next video (played sequentially) has a wordless chorus as its soundtrack – at moments sounding like screaming – as the same women are seen in a stagey curtained set where they slowly balance themselves standing on their heads or their hands, arranged into tableaux. As Starr's performers' skirts fall over their heads, there is a visual quoting of Rose Finn-Kelcey's iconic work from Chapter One, *The Restless Image – a discrepancy between the felt position and the seen position*, 1975. Instead of the instant of Finn-Kelcey's beach photo, the women slowly move into the same pose and hold it, poised.

The show's curator, Sophia Hao, brings a complicated revisiting of the first chapter, one that foregrounds the second chapter's quieter moments of self-awareness, after the dynamic and enthusiastic rush of Chapter One. Going from density to sparseness, the mirrors of Cullinan Richards's stands are left largely bare this time. The economic paring down and the change from primary sources to

more ambivalent and experimental video brings about a certain loss of focus and an increase in reflexivity and self-consciousness. In its structure, 'Of Other Spaces' chapters enact (and softly advocate) an enmeshment of a joyous engagement with the archive while sounding an important note of caution against identifying straightforwardly with what might be found there. ■

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